

A Narrative Inquiry of Women in Administration: Their Voices Heard

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## **Abstract**

This narrative study examined women's experiences in leadership positions in an educational setting in Southern Ontario. Semi-structured interviews with 4 women (2 principals and 2 vice principals) revealed 4 key themes: (a) considerations prior to entering into leadership and confidence instilled by others to continue on that path; (b) ongoing challenge of maintaining work-life balance; (c) others' perceptions of women in leadership positions; and (d) increasing number of women in leadership positions. The researcher used feminist standpoint theory to analyze data collected during interviews, which gave voice to the study's participants and shed some light on women's gendered experiences in leadership positions. Findings suggest that historical roots significantly influence society to continue with stereotypical gender roles, though some participants have overcome certain stereotypes. The literature review and participants' experiences suggest that women have made some progress throughout history yet society needs to remain vigilant while striving for gender equality.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Many people have the impression that we have achieved gender equality in the workplace for most people (Anderson, 1997). This may be the impression when reviewing the Ontario Ministry of Education statistics. In Ontario, the number of teachers and administrators in 1998 demonstrates that 28% of secondary administrators were women. This figure had risen to 44% by 2000 and to 60% by 2010 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000, 2011). However, it is important to further examine these statistics and gain further insight into any progression that has been made over recent years. Kellerman and Rhode (2004) acknowledge that the progress has been painfully slow and women still have a long way to go (p. 3), and add that

The vast majority of women in top jobs in corporate America hold staff jobs rather than the line positions that typically produce CEOs. Women account for just 6 percent of the top corporate earners. In academia, women faculty members earn 14 percent less than men. Despite four decades of equal opportunity legislation, the workforce remains segregated and stratified by gender. (p. 3)

The literature illustrates that corporate women are over-represented at the bottom and underrepresented at the top (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004). In fact, even despite their educational qualifications, the best-trained women are still in different kinds of jobs than men—the jobs with less pay, status, and power (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004). Interestingly, there are two reoccurring arguments for the reasons contributing to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Kellerman and Rhode (2004) examine two arguments presented by Friedan (1963) and Belkin (2003):

While Friedan and other leaders of the women's movement stressed women's desire for something more than husbands, children, and well-appointed homes, Belkin and her allies claim that many women are reasonably content, for years at a stretch, with exactly that. Friedan described a society that limited women's choices; Belkin sees a society in which women are exercising choices to reject the workplace. (p. 1)

These counter arguments raise very important perspectives in seeking out the reasons why there is a shortage of women in leadership positions. Could possible factors be a result of discrimination, or have women *chosen* not to lead? Again, they raise important questions and background inquiry into the underrepresentation.

Furthermore, women being underrepresented in positions of leadership is due to the traditional characteristics associated with women and the traditional characteristics associated with leadership (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004); as examined by leadership theories, most qualities associated with leadership are masculine: "dominance, authority, driving ambition, unflinching decisiveness, fierce determination, and so on" (p. 5). Therefore, a double standard is created with these expectations as women may be considered too soft or unwillingly to make difficult decisions when in a position of influence, and when they do possess these characteristics they appear too aggressive or strident (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004). Consequently, when women adopt these stereotypically masculine authoritative styles, they are rated lower when evaluated, especially when the authoritative role is typically occupied by men; therefore, women are encouraged to internalize these stereotypes which ultimately create a self-fulfilling prophecy (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004). The literature not only acknowledges the

underrepresentation of women in positions of leadership but also provides a few explanations as to why this exists. I intend to dig deeper into these reasons by analyzing the stories of women who have had experience in leadership positions.

This narrative study explores the gender-related issues that may arise when women find themselves in positions of leadership. These issues may contribute to the underrepresentation of women in various institutions. The purpose of this narrative study is to examine and gain an understanding of the barriers and challenges experienced by women in these leadership positions. A qualitative approach in researching this topic provides an in-depth description of these women's experiences. These detailed and rich data are essential to better understand the challenges that women pursuing leadership roles in education experience. In looking at the stories of these women, the study offers insight into the situations these leaders find themselves facing as they move through the various stages of the leadership pathway: from the interview process, to accepting the position, and to their experiences in the leadership position. In order to gain insight into the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, it is important to hear about these women's personal triumphs as well as trials that they experience.

### **Research Problem and Question**

The social world has been studied from the perspectives and interests of men and has often ignored the way women see and experience the world (Bernard, 1973; Neuman, 2000; Smith, 1998). Women have essentially been invisible in research and there is little examination of how gender-specific issues influence the lives of women (Maynard, 1994). In fact, literature demonstrates that gender stratification among administrators is exemplified when examining the high number of female teachers and low number of

female administrators (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988). This study will explore the following question: What are the gendered experiences women in leadership positions encounter?

### **Justification for the Research Problem**

It is important to conduct a narrative study which will examine the gender-related issues which arise for women in administrative positions and provide insight into the reasons behind this gender stratification. With these data at my disposal, one can surmise that a qualitative approach is essential for understanding the experiences of these women.

As cited in Ortiz and Marshall (1988), previous research suggests that gender-related factors are affecting women's entry and advancement within school leadership (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Grady, 1992; Grogan & Brunner 2005; Keller, 1999; Marshall & Kasten, 1994; Shakeshaft, 1999; Valian, 1999). This narrative study will provide the opportunity for female participants to tell their stories of their experiences in a leadership position. As Connelly and Clandinin (1988) state, "narrative is the study of how human beings make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future" (p. 24). The experiences shared from the female participants may illustrate factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. While the literature supports that women are underrepresented in positions of leadership, further research is needed to explore the reasons behind this issue.

### **Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study**

This study seeks to address the following question: How do women's gendered experiences within a position of leadership influence their lives within the context of gendered institutions? The purpose of the study is to understand experiences of women



within the male-dominated setting of administrative positions and how those experiences have been shaped as a result of women's gender. This study examines the barriers and challenges experienced by women in administrative positions. The women who volunteered to participate in this narrative study were asked to reflect on their experiences as female administrators within an educational system. In addition, as a practicing teacher, it was my desire to gain a deeper understanding into this issue as my goal is to follow an administrative pathway. Finally, this study may increase awareness of gendered leadership in the education system.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study's theoretical framework is framed by feminist standpoint theory (Hartstock, 1983). Some of the feminists theorists who have advocated taking women's lived experiences—particularly work experiences—at the beginning of scientific enquiry are “Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock, Hilary Rose, Sandra Harding, Patricia Hill Collins, Alison Jaggar and Donna Haraway” (“Feminist Standpoint Theory,” n.d., para. 1). It is important to hear the stories and experiences from women themselves in order to truly understand the underrepresentation of women. There are several key elements within the feminist standpoint theory that will frame my research study: the knowledge is situated; the perspectives from oppressed groups is more reliable and less biased from those who are from the dominant groups; and this perspective offers important insights that would be overlooked from the dominant group (Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1983, 1997).

Feminist research seeks to understand the world in ways that might be blocked by the dominant conceptual frameworks in our culture (Harding, 2004), to reconstruct the world in such a way that the interests of women are not subordinate (Jaggar, 1983), and

to create a shift in perspective. Furthermore, feminist standpoint theory focuses on empowering oppressed people while making them aware that their experiences are valued (Collins, 1989; Sandoval, 1991). Therefore, the ultimate goal of my study is to not only promote gender equity awareness but to also demonstrate to women that their stories are unique, valuable, and important.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Study**

This narrative study explores the experiences of a small number of women who are currently employed in leadership positions across Southern Ontario. The findings are specific to these women; therefore, the study will not allow for a generalization of findings to a larger group of women. Women who hold administrative roles at their school may relate to these female participants but cannot be generalized to include them.

### **Outline of the Document**

This narrative research explores the experience of four women who hold leadership positions within the educational setting of a school. Other women who are involved in this type of institution may be able to compare and contrast their experiences with the experiences of these women.

In chapter 2, I provide a literature review of works related to women and their experiences in the education system. I provide statistics relating to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in various institutions and the gender-related issues surrounding women's advancement in leadership positions. The literature review highlights why there are so few women in administration roles and the challenges and barriers that contribute to trying to advance and obtain positions in leadership roles. The literature review focuses on the following key concepts: women in

the education system—a historical context; social construction of gender; masculinity and femininity; and gender norms and family responsibilities.

In chapter 3, I outline the methodology and procedures I used during my study. I provide the purpose of my study and the importance of conducting a narrative study for this topic. I also outline the site and participant selection process prior to describing my data collection and analysis. Finally, I discuss the steps taken to ensure I established credibility and trustworthiness with my participants.

In chapter 4, I present my findings and discuss the four key themes that emerged from the interviews: (a) considerations, (b) balancing family and career, (c) perceptions, and (d) increase in the number of women in leadership positions. The themes serve to help the reader understand the women's experiences in an education system and also serve as a starting point for changes that could be implemented in order to support women advancing in leadership positions.

In chapter 5, I provide a summary of my findings and discuss the key concepts which emerged from this narrative study and while listening to these women's stories. Furthermore, I invite my readers and more specifically women to reflect on an important concept regarding supporting who we are and what we stand for. I also provide suggestions for future research that have stemmed from my research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Women have essentially been invisible in research and there is little examination of how gender specific issues influence the lives of women (Maynard, 1994). These gender-specific issues affect not only their personal lives but careers as well. Gender-related issues are present in the education system and hinder women whom aspire to advance in leadership positions. As a result women are faced with challenges and barriers while attempting to overcome the gender stratification existing in various institutions. In Canada, “the number of women in senior management positions remains low...women have still not reached the executive levels in organizations at the rates once predicted, despite early assumptions that time would be the remedy” (Wohlbord & Chenier, 2011, p. 2). Statistics Canada data from 1987 to 2000 reveals “that the proportion of women in senior management positions has virtually flat lined over the past two decades” (Wohlbord & Chenier, 2011, p. 2). Another daunting statistics reveals the gap between men and women resulting in women underrepresented in leadership positions: “In 2009, there were 26,000 women and 56,200 men in senior management occupations, although women held almost 48 percent of all occupations in the Canadian labour force” (Wohlbord & Chenier, 2011, p. 3).

This gender stratification is evident when examining the high number of female teachers and low number of female administrators (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988). The United States shares similar daunting statistics that exemplifies the problem is that women represent only 18% of the nation’s superintendents (Grogan & Brunner, 2005) in comparison to 75% of the nation’s teaching force (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Even though women are appointed to administration positions and, on average, are more

qualified and experienced than men (Tabin & Coleman, 1993, p. 189), women still remain underrepresented in leadership roles, particularly as high school principals and superintendents (Grogan & Brunner 2005; Keller, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1999). Of course, these positions are positions that hold the most power, responsibility, and compensations.

The literature illustrates that the contributing factor to the underrepresentation of women within school administration is gender related (Hoff & Mitchell, 2011). As cited in Ortiz and Marshall (1988), previous research suggests that gender-related factors are affecting women's entry and advancement within school leadership (see also Glass et al., 2000; Grady, 1992; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Marshall & Kasten, 1994; Shakeshaft, 1999; Valian, 1999). This review defines and discusses the key concepts of the historical context of these gender-related issues, the societal implications such as the social construction of gender, the dynamics of masculinity versus femininity, and the gender norms such as family responsibilities. This literature review highlights why there are so few women in administration roles and the challenges and barriers that contribute to trying to advance and obtain positions in leadership roles. Furthermore, the research indicates that the barriers to women entering into positions of leadership are many and complex.

### **Women in the Education System: A Historical Context**

Many will argue that women are gradually assuming more leadership positions in our contemporary world. However, as Shakeshaft (1989) states,

In spite of the fact that progress has been made over recent years [as top level leaders in educational institutions], there are still some glaring inequalities

which cry out for remedy...less than 1 percent of school superintendents are female. (p. 18)

In order to understand the inequalities that exist and affect women today, it is important to examine the historical context of women in teaching and administration. Women taking on certain gender stereotypical roles began as early as the 19th century:

Women did not vote or hold public position, nor did they own property, as they transferred all inherited goods to their husbands. Of course, they were not allowed to trade or have their own business, or exercise many professions, or obtain credit. The civil and peal codes considered them minors before the law. (Chinchilla & Leon, 2005 p. 8)

The traditional gender roles dated from the 19th century are highly embedded into present societal views. For example, the traditional view of a woman was as a housewife and man as being the isolated breadwinner of the family. Traditionally, women stayed at home, completed the housework, raised the children, and prepared the meals while the men were employed and expected to make money to support the families. As a result, the men were encouraged to become educated in order to be the breadwinners while the women were not encouraged to obtain an education as they were expected to be the housewives. Evidently, they would not have been given an equal opportunity to obtain a higher education degree because they did not work outside the home. It is important to become educated about these historical roles to better understand the roles of the present.

The history of women in teaching and administration is critical in examining the social barriers that previously exist, how they have evolved over time, and how they relate to women administrators today. In the early 1800s, ministers' wives began teaching

children from the ages of 4 to 7. However, these women were only paid one fifth of what men earned because they were viewed as not equally qualified (Stern, 1973). Between 1820 and 1830, teaching was recognized as a profession and certification was required (Shakeshaft, 1999). Men started to leave this profession, as they did not want to go through this process. Thus, the teaching profession became available to women (Shakeshaft, 1999). As noted earlier regarding the traditional roles of women, the rationalization for women obtaining these positions was due to the fact that individuals believed it was a natural place for the women and it would prepare them for motherhood (Sklar, 1973). This was a lifestyle that was encouraged for women. They were socialized to believe that taking care of their children, the home, and the husband was the appropriate role (Shakeshaft, 1999). Unfortunately this work goes unrecognized, as there is no wage associated with it. On the other hand, due to the recognition of monetary compensation received, the male is viewed as the more important and valuable member of the family.

Interestingly, Statistics Canada (2005) demonstrates similar gender roles within families. The following are the most recent statistics showing gaps between the two genders in terms of the traditional housework: Women spent an average of 4.4 hours while men spent on average 2.4 hours per day on house work. Eighty-five percent of women compared to 63% of men reported spending time on cooking and washing. Fifty-nine percent of women and only 22% of men spent time on housekeeping. In terms of childcare, women spent 2.4 hours per day and men spent on average 1.8 hours each day caring for their children. Have our historical roots significantly influenced society to continue with these stereotypical gender roles? It is important to note these historical

traditional roles in order to examine the relation to administration positions and positions of leadership. The demands between staying at home and pursuing a leadership role such as administration are an obvious challenge if herein lays the views of society.

In fact, between 1820 and 1900, there were only a few female administrators in the public education system. In many areas, women were restricted from being administrators and those that were often founded their own schools (Giddings, 1984; Solomon, 1985). It was not until 1928 when women started making a significant impact on the percentages of female administrators: 55% of elementary principals and 23% of country superintendents were female (Shakeshaft, 1999). However, these demographics quickly changed after the 1930s when it was believed that women should no longer hold these positions. They were seen as incapable of using discipline to maintain order because of lack of strength and status (Shakeshaft, 1999). Again, women continued to be viewed as incompetent and unable to obtain such a leadership position. Furthermore, the literature indicates that boards of directors preferred men, as they believed the women were not committed to their jobs because of family reasons. Therefore, the preference to hire men was endorsed even though studies proved that men did not stay any longer than women. In fact, men left their positions because of wage expectations rather than family concerns (Shakeshaft, 1999).

Throughout history, there are three major events that have significantly impacted women trying to obtain administration positions: the bureaucratization of schools, the suffrage movement, and the modern feminist movement. The bureaucratization of schools created a hierarchy in the school system. Prior to this establishment, teachers were doing everything in the school. Once the hierarchy system was in place, men took



on administrative roles while the women remained teachers (Tyack, 1974). This seemed appropriate at the time as it was reflected in society's views that women would take the less dominating role. The bureaucratization of schools may have implemented some stability and structure; however, it certainly did not allow women the option to move upward in the system.

The suffrage movement was a monumental moment for women. In order to gain the right to vote, women worked very hard to be recognized and anticipated gaining more responsibilities in the labour market. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Women who were obtaining administrative positions at this time were doing so due to the fact that either a man did not want the job or boards wanted to pay less money (National Education Association, 1905). Even though it is positive that women were obtaining administrative roles, it was not because they were respected as deserving individuals but rather it worked to keep the dominant group in place. Women's groups fought hard for their right to vote but without the support and recognition from the dominant group, they collapsed along with the support for women in administration (Gribskov, 1980). This illustration authenticates the frustration that women were experiencing. Lack of support can be detrimental to any group and is something that women are experiencing even today as they face new barriers and challenges. My concern is that this trend has continued and women feel overwhelmed by the lack of support they receive and as a result they do not work towards advancing their level of authority within educational leadership roles.

Lastly, the modern feminist movement proved to be the saving grace as women's issues were finally being recognized and driven from their own agenda. At this point, it

became clear that women were underrepresented in school leadership roles. However, since 1905, feminist researchers examined this issue and were able to identify that there has been an increase in women administrators through the 1980s. However, with the majority of researchers being male, women's issues and their perspectives have often been overlooked, as they were not seen to benefit males as members of the dominant group.

Affirmative action plays an interesting and complex role in this issue. For example, affirmative action is viewed as a positive change whereby a less dominant group receives more benefits and recognition. When thinking of affirmative action, one would think that women would have a greater chance of obtaining an administration position. However, the role that affirmative action has played with women is one that has given them employment equity by granting them an interview, but has not necessarily translated into being hired in an administrative position. Even though the majority of individuals enrolled in administrative studies were women, this does not reflect the actual number of female administrators (Shakeshaft, 1999). The goal and claim that affirmative action has created equality amongst all is under a false pretense. It may have been a starting point to have women recognized and considered for interviews but this starting point still has not extended to receiving equal recognition and considerations for positions.

The research presented demonstrates the discrimination women have faced throughout history in both teaching and administrative positions. Even though women did obtain administrative positions, it was often because it was for the benefit of society or the dominant group. They were either hired and paid a lower wage or hired because a

man did not want the job, rather than being hired because they were valued or deserving of the position. The traditional views of women as housewife are deeply rooted in our perceptions of gender roles today. It is important that we do not allow our historical cultural context to play out in a stereotypical way, but rather we must view it as a foundation that has built our present societal structure and deconstruct the structure through a critical lens as we move forward towards gender equality. As a society, we cannot accept the assumption that the role of the administrator does not fit the lifestyle of women. It is imperative that we look past these assumptions and historical standpoints and face these societal perceptions head on.

### **Social Construction of Gender**

The research indicates that the barriers to women entering school administration are many and complex. One of the major barriers women face on influencing gender equity is the social construction of gender. The social construction of gender affects organizations and institutions. These are “concealed processes that subtly and latently produce and reproduce gender distinctions” (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998, p. 787). As explored thus far, there are preconceived notions of which roles are better suited for men and which roles are better suited for women. Barriers that impact women are implicitly embedded in the culture and structure of an organization. However, the social construction of gender is a changing concept (McKay, 1997). McKay (1997) observes that “both men and women accommodate and acquiesce to pre-existing gendered structures and meaning” (p. 14). For example, when individuals become members of a new organization, they adapt and adopt some of the pre-existing beliefs of the organization. Due to these past social constructions, males and females need to

accommodate in order to fit in with the gender norms already established among the organization. Therefore, the group socially constructs them.

Additionally, Gilenstam, Karp, and Henriksson-Larsen (2007) discuss the influences of social constructions of gender using three different levels of society; the first, the symbolic level, is a “set of images and qualities that we associate with a certain object, group of people, etc.” (p. 237). That is, the values and beliefs already associated with the organization in which the member is being affiliated with. The second level is how personal experiences affect the formation of men’s and women’s identity (Gilenstam et al., 2007). Finally, the third level of society is the structural level, which is defined as “how power and social structure affect the distributions of resources and privileges of both sexes” (Gilenstam et al., 2007, p. 237). Power is created through the social construction of gender and this will influence the formation of individuals’ personal identity.

Finally, when examining the social construction of gender, Connell’s (2002) explanation of sex versus gender is applicable. Connell believes the sex of a person is defined biologically. Society, however, determines the characteristics of gender such as masculinity and femininity. Society decides who exemplifies these characteristics and how gender is expected to be expressed socially by each individual. The social construction of gender significantly affects women in pursuing and advancing in educational leadership roles.

### **Masculinity and Femininity**

As established, in the workplace setting, especially in organizations possessing a hierarchy, the male gender dominates significantly. This greatly affects women who are

trying to advance into leadership positions and obtain administrative roles. Therefore, women are faced with the challenge of pushing themselves to meet the demands of the typical male role. As a result, some women are conflicted between displaying their femininity and proving they are capable of leadership roles. As Kimmel (2004) states, “workplaces are both gender conforming and confirming for males but nonconforming and disconfirming for women” (p. 185). Men thrive in professional organizations when they portray their masculine characteristics whereas women try to minimize their feminine characteristics. By de-feminizing their characteristics, women try to adopt male values to achieve gender equality and hope of advancing in leadership roles (Bell, 1995). They moderate their femininity and disaffiliate themselves from other women and feminist movements to move up the institutional ladder (Bell, 1995; Kronsell, 2005). In order to excel in their careers, women are not easily able to maintain their personal identities as their social acceptance is based on this gender performance. Kronsell (2005) explains that: “women who have taken on leadership roles in hegemonic masculine institutions, such as becoming military leaders or heads of states, often have downplayed their femininity” (p. 292). Those who hold power in leadership positions, such as administrators, are expected to portray masculine characteristics which results in women downplaying their own femininity.

The feminist standpoint theory aims to further the causes of women. However, when women deny their feminine side, they unintentionally confirm that women do not possess certain qualities needed to succeed as a leader. In fact, they contribute to the ongoing cycle of gender inequalities by hiding their own femininity and conforming to masculinity. Women will push themselves to try and fit into these male dominated

institutions. In trying to meet these unrealistic standards, women do not further the causes but rather strengthen the order which oppresses them (Smith, 1974). The theme of masculinity versus femininity is an example of the social construction of gender. This concept explicitly in gendered institutions creates a very complex situation and challenge for women as they try to advance in the organization.

### **Gender Norms and Family Responsibilities**

Numerous scholars have argued that gender-related factors have discouraged women from entering into school administrative roles and hinder their progress toward advancement (Estler, 1975; Grady, 1992; Marshall & Kasten, 1994; Valian, 1999). One such factor that appears frequently in the literature is the persistence of gender norms. As examined in the historical context section, the gender norms which exist value men at work as the breadwinners and women at home as the caregivers. Studies on women in leadership suggest that women truly find themselves torn between the enormous demands of administration and their social expectations in regards to family responsibilities (Grogan, 1999; Hoff, Menard, & Tuell, 2006; Johnson, 1997; Tallerico, 2000; Valian, 1999; Young & McLeod, 2001). In fact women, much more than men, have to figure out how to balance family responsibilities with the pursuit of leadership roles without sacrificing anything from either. Therefore, this establishment of gender norms can result in women holding lower expectations for possible careers in administration. If it is assumed that the advancement in leadership positions requires adopting masculine traits, or facing cultural and social isolation, then these expectations will ultimately discourage many talented women from seeking a career in administration in the first place.

Furthermore, motherhood plays a significant role in hindering women to pursue administrative positions. Having children is a career risk for many women because they are viewed as less committed to the organization. The “ideal mother” is seen as someone who is always there for her children (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004) while the ideal worker puts her career first, thus making it difficult for women to feel that they can have a balance of the two. Consequently, women have to choose to take on either the expectations of ideal administrator or the ideal mother. Even though literature supports that having children does not affect a woman’s commitment to her work (Marsden, Kalleberg, & Cook, 1993), the perception remains that a women cannot have a career and family. This perception creates a significant challenge for women to as they pursue roles in leadership.

### **Summary**

The conceptualizations of gender are deeply rooted by our history. It is important to note that the concept of gender will continue to evolve and change over time as seen throughout history. We must examine the historical context to understand where these assumptions and perceptions stem from. Therefore, the effect gender has on the institutions and organizations will change and evolve over time as well. The social construction of gender, the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, and the gender norms of family responsibilities affect the lives of women. They hinder women’s advancement into leadership roles as well as affect organization’s views and perceptions of women’s capacities for these roles. Underlying issues of gender are still present in institutions regardless of any historical advancement. Researchers such as Kimmel (2004), Bell (1995), Connell (2002), Ortiz and Marshall (1998), and Shakeshaft (1999)

have highlighted some of these issues. This is a critical issue for our society that requires further research. We must understand the experiences of women who have faced challenges and barriers while advancing in administrative positions. This will give us better understanding of the impact of gender on these roles and allow us to move forward towards gender equality.



### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES**

The purpose of this study is to examine and gain an understanding of the experiences of women in leadership positions. By looking at the stories of women, the study offers insights into the issues the female leaders in this study find themselves facing as they move through the various stages of the leadership pathway: from the interview process, to accepting the leadership position, and to their experiences in the position of leadership. It is important to hear the personal triumphs as well as trials that women in leadership positions experience. A qualitative approach is the most useful approach to utilize for this study in order to thoughtfully illuminate the triumphs and challenges these women faced as they climbed the rank towards high positions of leadership. Through a qualitative approach, in-depth descriptions of the lives and experiences of women have the potential to be unveiled (Mertens, 2005; Neuman, 2000; Patton, 2002). A qualitative approach provides space for rich, contextualized, and detailed data to emerge (Mason, 2004).

The specific retelling of the triumphs and trials that these women have undergone since gaining their leadership position has never been documented. By inviting these women to tell their story detailing their involvement and experiences in their respective leadership positions, insights into how their specific organizations are affected by gender have been explored. Using a narrative approach I explored each woman's specific story in her respective position and express to the reader the impact of gender on these events.

#### **Research Design**

A narrative research design was used to unveil the variety of experiences women faced when they were in positions of leadership within an educational setting. These roles

included three principals and one vice principal. Narrative research is “about the telling of stories. The telling, listening, and reading of stories, provides the opportunity to share experiences about our own lives and the lives of others” (Sparkes, 1999, p. 19). This methodology allows an exploration of the participants’ history or past experiences and how it has contributed to present and future experiences (Creswell, 2012). Women need to recognize that their stories are important, meaningful, and need to be heard. Narrative research confirms that “when people tell stories to researchers, they feel listened to, and their information brings researchers closer to the actual practice of education” (Creswell, 2012, p. 501). As Creswell (2012) states, “for participants in a study, sharing their stories makes them feel that their stories are important and that they are heard” (p. 502). It was with this in mind that a narrative research design helped me establish this goal.

### **Site and Participant Selection**

In order to recruit women for this study, I employed a purposeful-sampling technique inviting women who were in various leadership positions within an educational setting to participate in my study on gender and leadership. A manager of a child-minding centre had exposure to variety of women in various leadership positions in the field of education. She provided potential participants with an information sheet regarding my study. In the event that the initial recruitment to participate was unsuccessful, I was going to employ a “snowball” method to recruit other women in positions of leadership based on the recommendations of her acquaintances. Creswell (2007) claims a snowball method “identifies case of interest from people who know what cases are information-rich” (p. 127). I did have to employ this method to recruit a fourth participant when my third participant was simply too busy to arrange a time for an

interview. I forwarded to my four participants a formal letter of invitation that outlined the details of my study along with an informed consent form for their review. The time of the interview was negotiated and took place in a comfortable and mutually agreed upon setting.

### **Data Collection**

The method I chose for data collection was the semi-structured interview. In order to collect the participants' stories as the data, an interview was the most authentic method to honour their voices and experiences. During the interview, I asked questions and listened carefully to their answers (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This method of data collection allowed me to gain insight into the women's stories, views, perceptions, and understandings of their experiences in a leadership position. During the interview, I followed a basic structure which included some open topics that I wanted to discuss. The interview was divided into four sections: (a) the participants' background and early experiences in the field, (b) challenges and opportunities, (c) gender relations in their organization, and (d) the participants' view of women in leadership roles in education. The rest of the interview allowed room for open discussion and exploration of other related items that arose during the interview.

The questions I asked in the interview stage of research were as follows:

1. Tell me about your journey to your leadership position.
  - a. Tell me about your first experiences with deciding to enter in a position of leadership.
  - b. What were some of your thoughts and considerations before taking this position?

- c. Explain the first job you ever had in this field.
2. Tell me about your experience in your current position.
3. How would you describe your workplace culture?
  - a. Describe your relationship with your co-workers, superiors, subordinates, staff, and students.
  - b. How, if at all, does history and tradition affect the culture of your workplace?
4. Who sits at the various levels of the organization?
  - a. Who are the formal leaders?
  - b. Who are the informal leaders?
5. Tell me about the demographics of people in your institution.
  - a. Address the number of men and women specifically.
6. Are there any examples that stand out where you found there was a challenge as a woman in a leadership position?
  - a. What experience stands out to you as the greatest challenge?
  - b. Do you think being a woman affected your experience? If so, how?
7. Is there anything else you wish to add concerning your experiences as a woman in a leadership position?

Based on the robust responses to the first interview, a second set of interviews was not necessary as the women provided such rich, detailed, and valuable insights into their experiences as women in a leadership position.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the stories of individuals were formed, the narrative aspect involved analyzing the stories in order to understand the participants' lived experiences and

honouring their voices by retelling their stories through the themes which emerged (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative analysis includes studying the “setting, characters, and plot to render an explanation, give meaning to some experiences, or offer insights into the motivation and purpose behind a chain of events” (Sparkes, 1999, pp. 22-23).

The first and second stage of the data analysis involved transcribing the data and member checking to confirm with the participants that the information they shared during the interview was what they wanted to share and also give them a chance to add any additional information if necessary. Following the initial interview I began the process of coding the transcriptions. This phase took place after the initial interview to determine what areas I would explore if necessary in a possible second set of interviews. As noted, it was not necessary to use Rubin and Rubin’s (1995) type of questioning to develop questions for the second interview. In the third stage, I began to put together the women’s stories by creating a set of charts representing the chronology of their experiences (Creswell, 2003) through the various stages. The various stages I was interested in were their initial thoughts of being in a leadership position, their journey trying to obtain such a position, and their experiences when receiving and obtaining the position of leadership. This chart essentially assisted me with retelling the stories of the four female participants (Creswell, 2003). For the fourth stage, I coded the data. As Charmaz (2002) states, “coding is the pivotal first analytic step that moves the researcher from description toward conceptualization of description” (p. 683). I used Creswell’s (2012) coding process by “making sense of the of the text data, dividing it into text or image segments, labelling the segments with codes, examining codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapsing these codes into broad themes” (p. 243). Essentially, this is an inductive process where I narrowed the data into a

few themes. Through out this process, I selected specific data to use and disregarded any other data that did not provide evidence for my themes (Creswell, 2012). I started to highlight key phrases, terms, and paragraphs that I felt were significant to these women's stories. Furthermore, I also used memo writing (Charmaz, 2002) by adding my own thoughts and identify areas I wanted to further examine. I used this at the beginning of the analysis and continued throughout the process. It allowed my analysis to be stronger, clearer, and theoretical (Charmaz, 2002). This process was important to my study as the information was easily available and highlighted. This process allowed me to better understand the participants and their stories.

### **Establishing Credibility and Trustworthiness**

As the interviewer, I wanted to ensure that the women felt comfortable and they could trust me with sharing their stories. In order to do so, it was important that I built and maintained a rapport with each of them (Adler & Adler, 1999; Neuman, 2000). The women determined where their respective interviews took place to further ensure the comfort of these women.

I used member checking (Creswell, 2012) by sending each of the women their transcripts to review and check for accuracy. This was an important process for my research as I wanted them to be involved in the process and ensure that their stories were represented in the best possible way. This collaboration between the researcher and participant is essential (Neuman, 2000). Upon request, a final report will be provided.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research adhered to the Brock University Research Ethics Board's ethical protocol (File Number: 12-002 – BROWN). Eligible participants were sent a letter of

invitation that outlined what would be expected of them and requested their involvement in the research. The participants were made aware that, at any point, they could withdraw from the research and any data associated were destroyed. The interviews were tape-recorded. If a participant did not feel comfortable, she did not have to answer a question. The identities of the women have been kept confidential as all were assigned a pseudonym. All the data on file contain only their pseudonyms. Therefore, all details regarding their identity and connections to their respective institution have been protected.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This narrative study explored the experiences of four women in leadership positions as administrators in Southern Ontario. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and through analysis four key themes were found. The themes emerged as a result of the participants' experiences throughout their journeys of becoming administrators. This chapter discusses the themes that emerged. The first theme is based on how the women did not initially consider becoming an administrator and how with the support of a mentor they considered this alternative career path. The second theme that emerged is the women's experiences with time commitment and their ongoing efforts to maintain work-family balance in their lives. The third theme explores the concept of perception and how they are perceived by others and also how they view themselves as leaders. Finally, the participants discuss the increase in the number of women in administrative roles over the past several years and suggest why this increase may have occurred. In order to maintain confidentiality, the names of the participants have been changed. The women's voices have been offset in block citation format as they share so many valuable experiences relating to gender issues in education.

### **Considerations Prior to Entering Into a Leadership Position**

All four women who were interviewed for this study would be considered extremely successful and accomplished with an educational setting. Leadership positions such as a principal, vice principal, or superintendent are viewed as successful positions in the education world. In order to obtain such a position, many recognize these leadership roles as ones that require several accomplishments and great success prior to entering. While these women all expressed that they took on leadership roles throughout their



lives, they did not necessarily consider becoming administrators. Their paths towards becoming administrators were one that was encouraged by a mentor or through the opportunity of an internship.

My four participants—Jodi, Connie, Kara, and Emily—share similar experiences in trying to obtain an administrative position by the support of a mentor. Jodi and Connie as principals were encouraged by mentors to enter into pathways that lead them to becoming an administrator. Similarly, Kara and Emily as vice principals were encouraged by mentors as well. Jodi describes her experience as one that she did not consider before:

They needed someone in charge when the principal was away so it was one of these things like “Hey, can you look after this? Hey, can you take care of that?” And I think I was incredibly organized so you needed someone that could do the documentation and organize the different things at the school levels so that provided an opportunity. My girlfriend had invited me to a leadership weekend...I was like sure whatever it’ll be fun...and I had not considered it before I went on that little weekend journey which I was not even interested at the time and thought you know I might be able to do that.

Jodi’s consideration into exploring this career began with the internship program:

The other piece that was appealing for me...so you didn’t have to leave your ETFO union, you could try it for a year and then I said yes, I will apply to become a vice principal because I actually liked the job and that sort of thing.

Jodi gives credit to those who also gave her a push into this direction by their ongoing support and confidence in her:

I guess in deciding to enter in this, I had a number of people that said I should so that helped. People had confidence in me and saying this would be a good fit for you in going into a position where you are in charge of a curriculum for a school board.

Similarly, Kara found herself in leadership roles throughout her educational career and her journey to becoming a principal happened pretty quickly:

I always tended to end up in some form of leadership position. Whether that was my first job as a supervisor of a bingo hall. What I was teaching, I always seemed to be not necessarily a formal leader but an informal leader either among peers or I take on extra responsibility at the school.

While Kara found herself taking on these leadership roles, a call by her superintendent and support from a mentor would help support the beginning to her journey towards a principal:

I was a vice principal for one year and then I was called by my superintendent and told I was going to be a principal this year but I had not applied to the pool so I was acting principal and then I had to apply to it this year in order to get into the principal pool. ...Now I am officially in the principal pool. ...It was actually my administrator at the time when I was a consultant....she said, if your long term goal is leadership, you need to do it now...So I thought about it and then I decided, I'll apply, I have nothing to lose.

Interestingly, my third participant, Connie, did not even think she would be where she is today as a principal:

I never ever, ever in any point in my time every thought of becoming a teacher. I actually was an interpreter....but then you know, you finish your bachelors, and then you go on to your masters and then what I'm I going to do after this and at this point I am married and I have a baby on the way and everybody else is applying to teachers college so I thought, "Oh well, I might as well apply to Teachers College. Don't know why I did that but because everybody else was so did I."

After Connie's teaching block, she absolutely loved it and found her passion for what she wanted to do despite the fact that she did not consider becoming a teacher. Connie also found herself in a position where she was nudged in the direction to become a principal:

But all the way through my teaching, I had different principals along the way that said, "You got to into administrations, you got to be an administrator. I will support you, I will do whatever you need to, you need to go."

Connie was not on board with doing that as she was happy being a teacher but her administrators insisted that she had to do it:

At one point, I thought I would look into it and what the Masters of Ed. is all about. I went to one class and thought this was not for me but I had to and their both female administrators that really pushed me and pushed me and pushed me.

Similar to Jodi, the process of becoming an administrator was more appealing due to the interim program because a shortage of teachers allowed her to try the position:

[My administrator] said, "Listen, you are doing the job already as a teacher in charge, you've got leadership in you...you're my divisional leader in

intermediate. You're already doing all of this so go and do the interim job. You get to try it and if you don't like it, you come back and lose nothing, give it a try."

So I thought, "alright, fine, I'll try it" because I was being pushed.

Lastly, Emily shared a similar experience towards her current leadership position as a vice principal:

Well, teaching is a second career for me. I spent ten years in public relations and communications which is what my degree is for...I volunteered and did an after school program with kids and helping them with their reading skills and I loved it and decided that I love my current career but I just decided I love that more. I just found it so rewarding and so I made the switch at 31 to go into Teacher's College. That's what brought me to teaching.

Emily expressed that she did not really decide to enter in leadership and that she was asked to cover for a short period of time while her principal was seconded to the board. She wanted to support her principal at the time as he was considering a pathway to being a superintendent:

You know, because he has always supported in my endeavors and when I was asked to do that, I felt like I was supporting him and that's why I said, "yes" not because I wanted to enter into leadership, or I really had not thought about it yet, but I wanted to support my principal.

Emily was encouraged by her superintendent that the time was right to make such a move:

At the time she said, "this is your chance to try it and see what you think and see if it's a direction you want to go in" and it was really awesome because it was a

no pressure, you know, you're helping and I felt like I was helping out by back filling that position. So it was really just like a no pressure, see if you like it, it was like a test drive of a car, you know, so you don't have to buy it, see if you like it and see if that is a direction you want to go and the answer was yes, I really enjoyed it.

Overall, all participants shared something in common which was that they did not plan to become administrators but were rather encouraged to pursue such a pathway. This was not a theme I thought would emerge from my interviews. I was under the impression that my participants would have a leadership position as their end goal. I began to wonder why I had this preconceived notion that a woman in a leadership role would be determined from day one to become an administrator. Perhaps society played a role in shaping my opinion? That is, that aspiring to be in a position of leadership requires you to have such a mindset at a young age.

### **Balancing Work and Family Life**

Studies on women in leadership suggest that women truly find themselves torn between the enormous demands of administration and social expectations in regards to family responsibilities (Grogan, 1999; Hoff et al., 2006; Johnson, 1997; Tallerico, 2000; Valian, 1999; Young & McLeod, 2001). In fact, women, much more than men, have to figure out how to balance family responsibilities with the pursuit of leadership roles without sacrificing anything from either. This was a reoccurring theme throughout the interviews. The women expressed that the time commitment their role demanded created a challenge in balancing family and work. When participants were asked, "When deciding to go into a leadership position, what were some considerations that you took

into place prior to doing so?” the women shared a common belief that they were concerned about the sense of balance with work and family life.

When thinking about considerations prior to obtaining a leadership role in education, Jodi replied:

I was maybe 32, I think at the time I was the youngest VP. And the things I had to consider I think was the time commitment because it was a lot more time and I was a mom so how much that would affect my day are issues, financial issues and that sort of thing. I don't think I considered aspect of stress. I don't think I realized that this would be so much more stressful than being a teacher in the classroom. ...But it was, it is for me all about my family whenever I made a decision and how it affected it.

Jodi also did not realize how the relationships you have with people make or break your life as a principal and those were the types of things she first considered, however, she did not formally sit down and plan it. Jodi took the principal course after she made the decision to apply. She acknowledged that it was a great decision for her but:

I don't recommend it for people who are 32 though, especially if they have young kids because it is a huge commitment and it is a lot of stress and if I had to do it again, I would do it older. ...If I had to do it again, I would wait until my kids were older and when they get to the age when their friends are more important than you then it is okay if I work an extra hour at the end of the day because they aren't home yet, they are out with their friends having fun but when [my daughter] was in grade 2 or 3, she would want to come home to me so it was a tough one.

While Jodi was reflecting on her experiences in this leadership role at a young age, it was clear that it was difficult for her how to negotiate how much time the job demanded:

I found it very difficult especially being a single mom. It's not like she came home with dad and then I got there eventually right so it increased the amount of time she spent in day care at the end of the day which was a bit of guilt on my part.

Jodi continued to explore this type of "mom guilt" in comparison to how her husband may feel about the time their children spend at day care. She mentioned:

Men don't feel the same guilt. I mean I feel guilty about the dog being alone too long and my husband doesn't give a rat's patootie. We just, we have a thing about the mom guilt that men don't feel the same so if my husband had to put the kids into day care and was going on to principalship, I don't think it would weigh on his head, he would argue differently, but not as hard as I would.

It was very clear that Jodi significantly values her current husband who is also a principal and the way in which he supports her in her career:

When I got remarried there was a part of him picking up some of the slack that obviously made it easier. My husband and I have said if we weren't an inter blended family, right, so we have my daughter all the time and his kids part of the time and had all of those kids been ours, one of us would have had to stay a teacher in order to be able to make the time management work and that sort of thing and it would have been him that would have stayed in the teaching because I had already gone on that journey before I had met him. I am very lucky because

my partner is in education and I think it is a lot more challenging when your partner is not. ...I have a spouse that is very supportive and we have taken turns. So you know he held on to something until I was comfortable and now he is doing his doctorate and I am picking up more of the slack so we kind of have a nice balance.

Family considerations were not foreign to Kara prior to becoming a principal as well:

Specifically when I decided to go into leadership, I had to consider how my family was first whether or not I could balance family and home or family and work. Those were very important decisions, I had to talk to my husband, talk to him about how it was going to change our family and whether or not he was willing to take on some of those more traditional roles even as specific as dishes and cooking that I had traditionally done, what he was willing to take on those roles so that I could do this and absolutely, he supported me a hundred percent but I wanted to wait until my children were at least in school full time and a bit more independent so that when he had to have them for longer periods of times that he could handle that....I have kind of been in the leadership path for a few years now and with each role has come more responsibilities, longer working hours and the balance between family and work has always been a conversation that is on going.

Kara continued to explore the topic of balance in her life with family and work:

I think that it goes in waves and it depends on the time period at schools...like report card time or the beginning of the school year then it's more difficult to find that balance because I get consumed with work and so I find it then that it



becomes a bit more strained from the kids because they want to see me, they want my time but my focus, I need to make sure things are running well here so sometimes the balance isn't there but that is kind of what we are always striving for, is to have a good balance, trying to get out of here to make dinner and spend time with the kids before they go to bed but it goes in waves definitely.

Being a mom, however, has allowed Kara to have positive experiences with being in the principal role:

I think being a woman affects your experiences because of what you are bringing to the role, as a mother, a teacher, the care giving role as a teacher, so it affects your experiences as a teacher because you bring those experiences together and you are able to identify with other people. So I think being a woman is a good experience because I became a better teacher as a parent because I could relate and have better conversations because I understood how it was to be one so I think that helps me relate to people.

Emily also acknowledged the time required to be successful in this role and considerations or hesitations she had in regards to her gender and pursuing this position:

My status as mother of three children and a busy family...I wanted to be able to do the job justice and I know there is a lot of evenings and weekends and it's a big commitment so I just wanted to make sure I could live up to that commitment.

When reflecting on her decision to enter into this role, she did not touch on the family side because she said yes right away to support the current principal. Even though Emily responded with an immediate yes, she reflected on how she may have done things differently in terms of consulting with her family:

Talking it over with my husband was something that I did not do and I wish I had because it is a big decision and it should have been a joint decision but it was kind of on the spot, give us an answer and I gave it. So, you know, with deciding to enter a leadership position definitely consulting with my family I wish I had done a better job.

Emily's comment was very similar to Kara's belief that it is an ongoing challenge to maintain balance but was something she even strived for as a teacher as well:

Juggling family, juggling home, responsibilities, getting kids here and there is, I think, it is not different than leadership or teaching...finding family balance and balance in your life between work and home is an ongoing challenge and making the change to leadership did not make a difference, quite honestly, it's always a juggle to find that balance and if you know someone who has found it, let me know!

The information that Emily provided really tackled the topic at hand which explored her at home conversations prior to entering into a leadership position.

When discussing entering into an administrative role, Emily and her husband's conversations involved discussing the topic of traditional gender roles.

Well I think from being a women, being a wife, and a mother it affected the discussions I've had with my husband. He is the primary breadwinner so you know he has always said it would be more value, more monetary value, to our family for him to work the extra hours and to put that into his work because the monetary pay would be better than me putting in the extra hours. ...It did impact, traditional, like traditional male/female roles husband/wife role, he would rather

me be at home more hours than I am. So yes, history and tradition has somewhat affected me.

These traditional gender roles, namely the woman as a housewife and a man as being the isolated breadwinner of the family date back to the 19th century and are highly embedded into present societal views. It is evident through these interviews that all the women had conversations with their spouses regarding traditional male/female as well as husband/wife roles. Relating to these traditional societal views on gender roles, it seems as though these conversations naturally occurred with their spouses because they are deeply rooted our societal views. Most important is the support that all these women received from their spouses in order to maintain their leadership roles. I wonder how this might look like for a single mom and the challenges she may face when trying to obtain a leadership role as a woman? Jodi briefly touched upon this aspect during her interview when she was a vice principal at 32 years of age as a single mom and made specific references to the difficulties she faced prior to remarrying. The history of women in teaching and administration is critical in examining the social barriers that previously existed, how they have evolved over time and how they relate to women administrators today. My narrative study revealed that it is critical to have a supportive spouse when trying to overcome the traditional roles of women as housewife and the men as the breadwinner of the family.

### **Perceptions**

A common theme emerged throughout all the interviews regarding perception. That is, how they perceive themselves and how others perceive them as a woman in a leadership position. As the literature review revealed, one of the major barriers women

face with respect to influencing gender equity is the social construction of gender. The social construction of gender affects organizations and institutions. There are “concealed processes that subtly and latently produce and reproduce gender distinctions” (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998, p. 787). As explored thus far, there are preconceived notions of which roles are better suited for men and which roles are better suited for women. Barriers that impact women are implicitly embedded in the culture and structure of an organization. Throughout the women’s stories, it became evident that we are still struggling to move away from these preconceived notions and move towards gender equality in the workplace.

When discussing their workplace culture and describing their relationships with co-workers, superiors, subordinates, staff, and students, the women seemed to reflect on their perceptions of themselves as a leader and how others perceive them. Jodi described herself as a servant leader where she approaches her staff with what she can do to make their job better and what they need to make their job more efficient. She stated:

So I don’t know that everyone views it the same way and I don’t know if that is a female thing but I would argue that my boss is very much a servant leader as well but that would be mine or where I come from, that’s my lens, so my workplace is very collaborative, it is a rare occasion where I am coming in and saying, “you must do this” unless someone has required it of us.

Jodi continued to discuss her experience with this approach and how other staff members and parents react to a female administrator:

I have encountered people who respond better to a male administrator, I have encountered people who respond better to an authoritative approach as opposed to

a servant approach because I think my servant approach can be mislead as a weakness and a push over and no back bone and then they realize, no, they were mistaken...I think we're looking into education in that it has shifted almost to the opposite in that most of the principals are women and it is accepted now and respected and what not.

Even though Jodi's belief that women in administration is more accepted, she describes some of her struggles with parents' views on her being a principal:

I have had parents though that have not responded well by gender and I have done creative things around that so I had one, and I am not saying this is true of all, I had one Muslim family who had no respect for women in a position of authority so my VP at the time was a male so we pretended he was the principal and I sat in as the VP...the father made no contact with me and had I run the meeting it would not have gone well so with certain families, we were fortunate, because you don't have a VP but with certain families we pulled the switcheroo we called it. So we would say, "should we pull the switcheroo with this meeting?" and I would say, "yes, probably a good idea with this family so you take the lead and I am just here as the observer." I want the meeting to be successful with the parents and in some cases when some cultures where women are not to be in a position of authority we pretended and I am not sure if that is a good thing or not but that is what we did.

Kara also had an interesting relationship with parents largely because the principal prior to her was a male and highly respected. It did cross her mind whether or not her messages would be taken seriously and if she would be respected as a female principal. She wondered:

Whether or not there is the same respect because, you know, people would come in here saying “Oh, you know, you’re a girl not a guy...” so there was definitely parents making comments when they come in thinking they would replace me with another male, so there was that right to my face but I think I just brushed it off and I think once they get to know me it is not going to matter if I am female or male or young or old they are going to see that I am here to make a great place for their kids to learn.

Connie’s experiences with parents has also been difficult because of their perception of women in a leadership position:

I think of one dad and he and I took a long time before he respected me and he does and he tells me he does but I have had some bad experiences with certain males specifically and more often then not and this is a cultural thing again from different backgrounds when they come in and they have a hard time with a women in this role and women are nothing type of thing and this will be a challenge to some extent and I have often thought in that case that is where you almost need one male and female for administrator... I feel just because I am a women, you’re not going to respect what I am saying to you and then I am not taking this or you’re too emotional or you know, you’re just on your PMS now. I have had parents tell me that before, not often but it has been said, right... occasionally from a student as well but where does that come from? Is that coming from the home because that is what they have been brought up in? Occasionally from the cultural thing but I would say the biggest group is the white Caucasian male that is just arrogant you know, you’re a female. ...When I had the

lower economic type families, I would probably have to say it happened a little more there than it happened here, and it is because of their ignorance at that point...it is the aggressive whereas here it is more arrogant and more intelligent than you because you are women type thing.

Jodi was able to dig even deeper into people's perception of women being in administrative roles when she discussed the difficulties women have in leadership:

The difficulty we have as women in leadership is the perception. So if my husband can be strong, authoritative, he gets that definition that is a strong male. If women are strong, they get the label of a bitch...so it's the perception piece that is difficult...it is unfortunate how women have to act in that role so sometimes that natural part of my personality as a woman is to be nurturing and a servant leader and that sort of thing, I am not sure if that is what you have to be or can be to be a superintendent. The role dictates that you have to take on a male persona in order to be successful and that's the part I find sad. That you can't be true to the character you are that you have to take.

Kellerman and Rhode (2004) would completely agree with Jodi's statement in regards to women having to take on a male persona to be successful. When women do possess these characteristics, they appear too aggressive or strident (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004). Consequently, when women adopt these stereotypical masculine authoritative styles, they are rated lower when evaluated especially when the role is typically occupied by men (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004). Jodi acknowledges the importance of being true to the character you are and not contributing to the ongoing cycle of gender inequalities by hiding your own femininity and conforming to masculinity.

The idea of women being authoritative in a leadership role and being viewed as a “bitch” was also shared by Kara. When she felt pressure coming into the role after following a man, she started to question how she was going to approach her staff and it crossed her mind about being a woman in this role:

How do I do it without coming across as a bitch because most women in leadership positions, from people that I talked to, are looked at as bitches because when a guy or a man has authority it is, I don’t know, that has been my experiences. Whenever I have had a female principal, staff tend to talk about the fact that they are mean and bitchy instead of the fact that they have to show authority, so it is finding the fine line of when do you have to use your authority and how do you use it so that you are not viewed that way, is always challenging I find...but it is always in the back of my mind about when you have to actually use your authority and how that is portrayed a woman...The perception of women as being authoritative and having to make a difficult decision or conversation is a fine line because it can come off differently when you are a man or a woman.

Jodi and Kara provided important concepts that shed light on their experiences as woman in a leadership position and the challenges and barriers they have faced. The qualities both women are describing when they may be viewed as being a “bitch” or ones that are typically associated with masculine characteristics: “dominance, authority, driving ambition, unflinching decisiveness, fierce determination, and so on” (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004, p. 5). Therefore, a double standard is created with these expectations and women are not encouraged to portray such characteristics. Women are encouraged to



internalize these stereotypes, which ultimately create a self-fulfilling prophecy (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004).

The greatest challenge Jodi shared for women in leadership is this concept of perception. The way in which others perceive Jodi in her role as an administrator has been challenging and describes it as one of the greatest challenges:

It's getting past that perception that you earned it and you didn't earn it doing something sketchy, right, um because nobody says that about men, right, there are women who do use their feminine wiles to get them what they want which perpetuates that and it is true, that is how they got there, but I think it is perception that kills us the most and sometimes we do it to ourselves and sometimes it's done on the outside to us. I totally think, and my husband jokes, that I am half male. Like I am not a typical female. I don't know, yah he just shakes his head and says you are so male sometimes but I don't, I think me being a women has totally affected my experience and my experience is nothing like his because we do the same role and we face completely different challenges and the staff respond differently, I could say the same words and my staff would have responded differently then they did to him. Sometimes, it has been very interesting where I have given my approach to a problem that he turns to me and says that's a very female approach and I say I just want you to just try it and see...I see the gender differences or gender approaches to situations.

However, as Connie expressed, she has not experienced her subordinates, superiors, and staff responding negatively to her being a woman in a leadership role. Connie found it interesting when she was thinking about her female superintendent:

It is interesting when you're asking about superintendents and I have to think that as I am telling you the names I am thinking, interesting...all of these women are tough and have almost masculine like personalities, you know what I am trying to say? It's not the soft, emotional, it is really interesting to me as I think about it more and more. ...People were more afraid of being in an area with a female superintendent...it is a perception.

Much was uncovered as Connie was provided an opportunity to reflect on her experiences and the way in which others perceive her as an administrator. When Connie applied for an administrator posting, she was surprised to learn that she did not receive the position as she was very qualified to obtain such a job. She reflects, "I was so upset as were some others who had gone through this job, and when I think about it now I think we were all females that went for the job". She spoke with her superintendent and said:

I know I am very emotional, and I know because I get passionate, I don't see that as a fault, I am not a basket case but I will take things to heart and I do have to wonder is that why you held back from offering it to myself or anyone else for that matter...do you feel that I wouldn't be able to handle the stress? And that, in my gut I still feel that might have been in the end why I did not get that position...I do wonder if that was a part of it. I can't tell you for sure if me being a woman affected my experience, but that is my gut. That my emotions, the fact that I am passionate and that I am not this way and straight and poker face, if that is what me being a women is about then yes, it did but it's just who I am then, I can't really tell for sure.

When Connie was reflecting on this experience in her life, her response validated the literature regarding the struggle women undergo when in a position of leadership. In the workplace setting, especially in organizations with a hierarchy, the male gender dominates the top positions. Women are faced with the challenge of pushing themselves to meet the demands of the typical male role in that top position. As a result, some women are conflicted between displaying their femininity and proving they are capable of leadership roles. As Kimmel (2004) states, “workplaces are both gender conforming and confirming for males but nonconforming and disconfirming for women” (p. 185). Men thrive in professional organizations when they portray their masculine characteristics whereas women try to minimize their feminine characteristics. By women de-feminizing their characteristics, they try to adopt male values to achieve gender equality and hope of advancing in leadership roles (Bell, 1995). Connie is proud that she has feminine characteristics and acknowledges that she does not want to de-feminize her characteristics if that would help her advance in her career. Even though she felt that she felt as though that is what could have held her back from obtaining the position, she acknowledge that it was impossible to really know if that was the case. This study does not examine the gender related issues in the hiring process, however, Connie’s experiences and wondering if it was gender related suggests possible future research: gender related issues in the hiring process for women in leadership positions.

### **Increase in Number of Women**

When asked about the demographics of the women and men in their institution, the participants believed that there were more women in leadership positions in

education than in previous years. It was only natural for the women to explore why this may be the case. They offered some interesting insights including suggestions as to why they believe the numbers have increased in women in leadership positions in their institution over the years.

Jodi offered her thoughts on this topic:

I don't know if this is a right thing to say but I think the job description changed. I think a male administrator when you were in schools and when I was in school was managing a building, so typically Phys. Ed. people were promoted to be a principal because they had organized track and field and they had organized tournaments and convened leagues and they should have these organizational skills that represented a managerial strength but that is not the job anymore. The job is much more of an instructional leadership piece and that is where in a lot of cases women were better prepared for that and women had the skill set. Now, some women were promoted with a managerial skill but I think the job has changed and it is much more difficult at that time when it gets the shift to find men with that skill set and there are less men in education so you are pooling from a smaller pool and there are more women in education. ...That would be my theory but I don't know if it is true. Maybe we screamed and yelled loud enough, that's it too, or society shifted right, not just education.

Kara believes females outnumber males in education in leadership positions and has seen a change over the years:

I definitely have, I have seen more females getting into the roles as administrators. I would be interested myself to know the numbers whether it is. I

don't know the numbers are, 50/50 or more lop sided to one side? I think the women coming into leadership and I don't know for sure but my perception is that women are becoming principals more now than before. I always found more males and even through all my teaching experiences and so I think that females are becoming or beginning to either meet up or go past the number of male principals but I don't know for sure, that is just my perception.

Connie had a similar reaction when reflecting upon the number of women and men in leadership positions in education:

Oh, there are way more females now than when I first started. Like way more. Very interesting. Lots of males at the beginning but now you look around and I would say majority of females for sure...The women tend to be more career driven than the males, that's what I would say, even the males that are going forward now who are not getting through are doing so because "I am a principal, I can do it and so on, and they are the ones, and I don't want to generalize because its not all of them but many of them are just saying "yah, I'll show up at quarter to nine, no no I am not staying tonight until 3:30," whereas the females, no matter who I talk to are in late, are working weekends, working at home, you know they are so much more driven to get the job. ...They don't seem to have the passion and as I said, it is not all of them but many of them I talk to say, "Yeah, I don't worry about stuff like that." I think there is a human element missing from them and I don't know if that is a female thing? Because males tend to be like this [strength gesture] and I just fall apart emotionally. ...Men

have a harder time admitting they can make a mistake, they do and I mean there is still that, I don't know arrogance or, "I am the man so I can't break down."

While Emily did not really notice a difference in the numbers of male and females in leadership positions in her institutions, she seemed interested to look into the numbers more thoroughly:

I've never noticed either way so it must be somewhat balanced because I have never noticed an over abundance of male superintendents or and overabundance of female superintendents. I have never noticed, so what does that mean? That there is somewhat of a balance? That's a good question. It has not resonated with me either way. Even in my new administrator mentor pool, and even then I haven't noticed one way or the other. There's males, there's females.

As discussed in the literature review, the literature illustrates that women are overrepresented at the bottom and under-represented at the top (Kellerman & Rhode, 2004). As Shakeshaft (1989) states, "less than 1 percent of superintendents are female" (p. 8). Furthermore, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2011) confirms the imbalance of women representing positions in the education system. The teaching population in Ontario is comprised of approximately 70% women, however, less than 50% of school administrators are female (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). Since 1998, the number of secondary school women administrators had risen to 60% by 2000 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000, 2011). On the surface, the statistics suggest that the education system has moved towards gender equity with this significant increase but further examination is important.

It is important to acknowledge that these women are seeing a change in their own institution. Their experiences, however, do recognize that in spite of the progress we have made over the recent years, there are still some glaring inequalities that cry out for remedy (Shakeshaft, 1989). After listening to the experience these women have faced throughout their career and reviewing the literature, I agree with Kellerman and Rhode (2004) that the progress has been painfully slow and women still have a long way to go (p. 3). Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) explain, “Although representation of women in school leadership has increased, women still do not fill administrative positions in proportion to their numbers in teaching, or in proportion to those who are now trained and certified to become administrators” (p. 28).

### **Summary**

Through the sharing of their stories about their experiences as women in positions of leadership, common experiences offered insights into their roles. Overall, the four women participants believed they had many considerations to take into account prior to entering into a leadership position. The women agreed that having a mentor was helpful and encouraging for them when moving forward towards becoming leaders within their institutions. This provided them with some encouragement to move beyond their hesitations and into an administrative role. The women shared a common experience of their ongoing struggles to balance between work and family life. The demanding number of hours made it difficult for these women to balance the time commitment with work and their family life that ultimately led to moments of guilt if one aspect was being neglected. The women involved in this study also acknowledged the existence of how women can be perceived when demonstrating certain

characteristics. Finally, the women agree that there has been an increase in women in leadership positions over the past several years. Since their initial experiences in the teaching, they have observed this trend. In chapter 5, I relate these four themes to feminist standpoint theory and literature. I also provide my own personal thoughts and conclusions on the experiences of women in leadership positions and offer some last words.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND LAST WORDS**

The literature not only acknowledged the underrepresentation of women in positions of leadership but also provided a few reasons as to why this may exist. This qualitative approach intended to dig deeper into the existing reasons by giving a voice to women who have worked in positions of leadership. Through the telling of their stories this narrative study provides insight into the gender-related issues that arise with women in leadership positions.

The social world has been studied from the perspectives and interests of men and for the most part ignored the way women see and experience the world (Bernard, 1973; Neuman, 2000; Smith, 1998). Literature demonstrates that gender stratification among administrators is exemplified when examining the high number of female teachers and low number of female administrators (Ortiz & Marshall, 1988). In fact, the literature focused on gender in education administration, demonstrates that women are significantly underrepresented in administration especially in relation to the dominance in the number of women who hold teaching positions (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Loder, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1989; Smith, 2011). Therefore, it was important to conduct a narrative study that examined the gender-related issues that arise for women in administrative positions and provide insight into this gender stratification.

As the theoretical framework, feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1983) was important when framing my research study. This perspective allowed the research to acknowledge the important insights that would be overlooked from the dominant group: that knowledge is situated; the perspectives from oppressed groups is more reliable and less biased from those who are from the dominant groups; and this perspective offers

important insights that would be overlooked from the dominant group (Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1983). The feminist standpoint theory focuses on empowering oppressed people while making them aware that their experiences are valued (Collins, 1989; Sandoval, 1991).

The themes which emerged from this narrative study are: considerations prior to entering into leadership and the confidence others provided to continue on that path; the ongoing challenge of balancing work and family life; how women are perceived in leadership positions; and the increase in women in leadership positions, all of which provided an opportunity to examine and gain insight in women's gendered experiences in a leadership position. They also provided insight into the historical context of gender-related issues and the societal implication such as the social construction of gender, the dynamics of masculinity versus femininity, and the gender norms such as family responsibilities.

There are both similarities and differences between the four participants but each of them touched upon these four key concepts regarding gender. Therefore, the themes that emerged from this study are very important to women in positions of leadership.

The participants shared similar considerations regarding their decisions to enter into a leadership position as well as gaining confidence from others to continue on that path. All four participants considered the effects this would have on their family and the roles their spouses would have to take on such as watching the kids, cooking, and cleaning that they traditionally did. However, while these traditional roles are embedded in our societal views and present in their homes, the women overcame these stereotypes

as they entered into their roles. The women expressed the significance of their spouses and without the support of their significant others that this perhaps would not be possible.

The four participants agree that as women in leadership positions, there is an ongoing challenge they experience with balancing work and family life. This either led to the participants feeling guilt if they were neglecting their job related work or their roles within their family life. Ridgeway and Correll (2004) would relate the participants' feelings to this concept of an "ideal mother," that is someone who is always there for her children and puts her family first. The ongoing challenge to maintain balance in their work and family life is one that Landon (1996) describes as the most difficult challenge for women to move up the ladder: "A major impediment to progress at senior executive levels is the difficulty of balancing careers and family. That remains one of the most difficult issues facing women seeking to climb to the top of the corporate ladder" (para. 7). This sentiment further implies that women traditionally take on the gender stereotypical role of being the primary caregiver in the home and taking on the responsibilities for the family.

The perception of women was a key concept that emerged from listening to the women's stories. That is the perception of women in leadership roles in terms of portraying certain characteristics. This finding was compelling as it demonstrates a challenge and barrier that women experience in leadership positions. These women have been able to recognize how society such as parents perceive them as women in leadership positions and have found ways in which to deal with this barrier. Two participants shared the "switcheroo" method in which the male VP would pretend to be the principal when dealing with parents who did not respect a woman principal. The women also expressed

the ways in which others view them as women in a leadership role when portraying “masculine” characteristics. This often led to others viewing them as a “bitch” which they agreed men do not get labeled for this. Therefore, after analyzing the interviews, it became evident that the findings suggest women have not necessarily overcome these challenges and barriers but certainly recognize them to find ways in which to deal with them. Feminist research seeks to understand the world in ways that might be blocked by the dominant conceptual frameworks in our culture (Harding, 2004), to reconstruct the world where the interests of women are not subordinate (Jaggar, 1983), and to create a shift in perspective. The feminist standpoint theory focuses on empowering oppressed people while making them aware that their experiences are valued (Collins, 1989; Sandoval, 1991). The women empowered by their participation through the sharing of their experiences in this study can also contribute to the shift in perspectives of women and reconstruct the ideologies of women in leadership positions.

The women’s beliefs in the increase in women in leadership positions could be examined in future research. Since their initial roles as educators in the education system, all four participants believed that the number of women in leadership positions has increased over time. However, this theme that emerged only further indicates the importance of listening to the stories of women and the gendered challenges and barriers within the system. Rather than women “conforming” or finding ways in which to shape themselves to be accepted by society, it is important for women to move forward by remaining true to themselves.

The conversations with the women and listening to their stories were inspiring, heartfelt, honest, open, rich, and difficult at some points. The findings suggest that our

historical roots significantly influenced society to continue with these stereotypical roles; however, some of the participants have overcome this stereotype, as they were able to obtain a leadership position. The traditional views of women are so deeply rooted in our perception of gender roles today. It is absolutely imperative that we do not allow our historical cultural context to play out in a stereotypical way, but rather we must view it as a foundation that has built our present societal structure and deconstruct the structure through a critical lens as we move forward towards gender equality. As a society, we cannot accept the assumption that the role of the administrator does not fit the lifestyle of women and that they are not capable of taking on such a position. It is imperative that we look past these assumptions and historical standpoints and face these societal perceptions head on.

### **Future Research**

From this study, possible future research could be for school boards to expand this research across a larger group of women. The findings are specific to this particular group of female administrators and therefore the study does not allow for a generalization of findings to a larger group of women. Women who hold administrative roles at their schools may relate to these female participants but the results cannot be generalized to include them. Therefore, it would be beneficial to have a larger group of women interviewed to further explore these findings.

Another key idea that surfaced during this study is the women believing that the number of women in administrative positions in education has increased over the years. In order to understand the history of gender equality in this institution, it would be beneficial to further explore specifically the number of men and women who hold

administrative and superintendent positions through a quantitative research study. A further qualitative study is appropriate in order to provide insight into why the numbers have increased over the past several years. For example, have societal views on gender related issues with women in leadership positions emerged or has the education system allowed greater opportunity for women to advance in educational leadership positions? Furthermore, one of my participants, Emily, shared what future research she would be interested in:

I would love and I don't have it to add now, but I would in the future, I would love to be able to compare being a VP with a male to being a VP with a female, just to compare and contrast. Because all my experiences as a temporary VP has been under the guidance of a male administrator or principal so I think it would be neat to work with a number of different females and just compare and contrast.

A study regarding women's specific experiences with males and females and compare and contrast those experiences would be an interesting and relatable future study.

### **Last Words**

As my literature review revealed, there were three major events that significantly impacted women trying to obtain administration positions: the bureaucratization of schools, the suffrage movement, and the modern feminist movement. Women have fought long and hard for their rights and experienced a great deal of frustration while trying to move forward towards gender equality in the workplace. When examining this historical content, the lack of support women have received throughout history is alarming. Lack of support can be detrimental to any group and my concern is that this trend will continue and women will feel overwhelmed by the lack of support they

receive. The lack of support from society including parents, spouses, superiors, and various stakeholders in the education system can be challenging for women advancing in leadership positions. If women do not feel supported, I am concerned that women will not work towards achieving their true potential within educational leadership roles and their experiences will be that much more challenging. While my participants' stories are relevant to them, I was pleased to discover that they all had supportive spouses and mentors along their journey. This shed some light on the possibility that traditional gender roles can be challenged and women can move past this with the support of their spouses and family. This only further confirmed my belief in the importance of supporting women and their journey to obtain leadership positions in any institution.

The goal of my study not only was to promote gender equity awareness but to also demonstrate that women in leadership positions have unique stories that are both valuable and important. I believe that my four participants felt valued, unique, and important because they were able to share their stories with me and reflect on their own experiences. They were able to discover new ideas about themselves, reflect on their experiences leading to where they are today and strengthen their current beliefs about themselves and women in leadership positions. As we move forward, we must continue to listen to the experiences of women and have their voices heard.

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